

## Offbeat Island

# Nobody Is Neutral Under Aruba's Hot Sun

The Trocadero Bar on the Caribbean island of Aruba is spacious, sunny, and breezy, with slated doors and a long white porch that faces the sea. It's the kind of place where you might discover Somerset Maugham, or the ghost of Humphrey Bogart, eyeing you sullenly from the other end of the black marble counter.

Aruba is in the island group called the Netherlands Antilles, a Dutch possession, and the Trocadero is on the waterfront in Oranjestad, its capital. Fifteen miles southward, over a blue-green sea, are the mountains of Venezuela. The bamboo chairs on the Trocadero porch afford

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a lulling, panoramic view: First the concrete, palm-lined quay, dotted with native fruit stands; then the pier lined with fishing sloops; then, near the white sandbar at the entrance to the harbor, one or two heavily-laden smuggling boats, waiting to make their stealthy trip to Colombia.

Under a burning sun on a recent morning, four men were sitting on the Trocadero porch drinking beer. Two were Antilleans: "Boeboe," a local merchant, and "Makaku," a landowner. ("Boeboe" is a Papiamentu-language nickname for a family's eldest son; "Makaku" is the Swahili word for monkey.) Like most Antilleans, they were of Dutch ancestry mixed with the native stock.

The third was a Dutchman, Jos Van Kuljk, Aruba editor for the *Amigoe di Curacao*. The *Amigoe*, a daily, is the largest paper in the Netherlands Antilles. And the fourth was an American—me.

### Their Holland Is Gone

Most of the Trocadero patrons are Dutchmen or prosperous Antilleans. Many of the Dutchmen are former seamen or officers in the Royal Dutch Navy, and when they talk about Holland you feel they don't really believe it exists. The Holland most of them know was the Holland before World War II, and it is more a memory than a fact.

There is, of course, still some tangible contact. Letters come and go; they smoke Dutch tobacco and drink Dutch beer; their language is Dutch—but their souls are in a sort of Caribbean limbo, and time weighs heavy on their hands.

Their salaries are high, by any standards, and their daily routines are long since established: Open the office in the morning, close it at noon, open it again at two, and lock up at six. They are paid for their responsibility, they explain. The work is done by employees.

They also explain it is necessary to drink in the tropics, "to keep the system in balance." And besides, there is not much else to do. On most mornings you will find them at the Trocadero, running up bar bills averaging well over \$120 a month, per man.

They are a laughing, talkative lot, with sharp tongues and a combative sense of humor. The conversation ranges, as it does on most islands, over the full range of local gossip and backstage politics. During my visit one of the main topics was a forthcoming election, when Aruba would elect eight members to the "Staten," the Netherlands Antilles legislative council. Whichever party won the majority of the seats would rule the island for the next four years.

### The Animosity Is Mutual

There are two main parties: The Aruban Patriotic Party (PPA), which has been in power for eight years; and the Aruba People's Party (AVP). They are noted less for their ideological differences than for their deep-seated mutual animosity.

On this morning at the Trocadero, Makaku, the land-owner and a member of the AVP, asked the American if he had enough film to take pictures of "all the hangings" that would take place the day after elections. Then, he nodded at Boeboe, a PPA supporter. "The fat swine," he said. "We're going to hoist him up."

The American looked at Boeboe, who smiled placidly.

Makaku reached over and patted his shoulder. "Ah, Boeboe," he said gravely. "You are a good friend of mine. I love you like a brother. But after the voting—



A tourist relaxes on the eight-mile beach of the island of Aruba. In the background is the Aruba Caribbean Hotel.



De Olde Molen, Aruba's best restaurant is a reminder of the Netherlands for Aruba's Dutch residents.

with tears in my eyes—I am going to hang you."

He turned back to the American. "You ask who is who in these elections, well by God I tell you—it is the decent people against the cut-throats and the Bolsheviks."

Van Kuljk, the journalist, chuckled quietly. "I think it is time for a cool beer," he said, signaling the barman. Makaku was still talking about "hangings, hangings."

Boeboe nudged the American. "Don't pay any attention to this fanatic," he said with a smile. "He is an old and bitter man."

"Hah," Makaku snapped. "He'll pay attention when he sees you dangling from a lamp post." He nodded solemnly. "The day of judgment is coming—we have a noose for every one of you thieves."

### Reprisals and Vendettas

Boeboe laughed. "Who do you call thieves? Only 2,000,000 out of 20,000,000—10 per cent, is that thievery?" He looked at the American. "I ask you seriously—would you hang a man if he took only 10 per cent?"

There would, of course, be no post-election hangings. (The PPA, incidentally, retained its majority of five of the eight seats.) But sweeping economic reprisals and lingering personal vendettas are common after each contest at the polls. When a party comes into power, for instance, almost all government em-

ployes of the other party are fired instantly—unless they have been secretly working for the opposition.

Many do. Few Arubans are neutral at election-time, although they are often afraid to say which side they are on. After the elections, however, everything settles back to normal.

Relatively, that is. "Normality" on Aruba is a hard word to pin down. For the white Dutchman, for instance, it is a life strung out over long hot months and years, staring at the barren, cactus-studded Aruba landscape as it turns faintly red toward evening. The "cunucu," or Aruban countryside, is indeed one of the ugliest sights in Christendom: A land of scrub brush and huge boulders, dry gullies and mile after mile of rock-strewn flats.

### Americans Live Apart

For the American Colony at Lago, the world's largest oil refinery, normality has little to do with Aruba. The 2,000 Americans down there on the island's southern tip live almost entirely apart. Now and then you will see one or two in Oranjestad or at the Aruba Caribbean hotel. The local Dutchmen call them "utility people," and add, with a wry smile, that they "are living out there behind their wall."

Americans are not viewed with much enthusiasm. With the possible exception of President Kennedy, the only one who enjoys any popularity is the late Lloyd Smith, a former president of Lago. There is a statue of him in front of the Aruba Cultural Center, and the new road on the south shore is called Lloyd Smith Boulevard.

For the American tourists at the big, new hotel, normality is what they left at home. They spend their days peddling idly around in the surf on things called watercycles, or just wandering up and down the beautiful eight-mile beach that stretches from the hotel in both directions.

The Aruba Caribbean is three years old and doing well, according to the local Tourist Board, but it is not very popular with the natives. "That is not Aruba," they say. "It is ugly."

It is also expensive. During the winter months a single room goes for \$28 a day, and in the summer, \$17. But a guest is granted the opportunity to get it all back at the casino.

Aruba is a peaceful place with enough strange twists to make it interesting. The Divi-Divi tree forever points downwind, and there is a tower 200 feet offshore at the Palm Beach Club where you can have your drink sent out by cable car. The wind never stops, it almost never rains, and the people are hospitable in the extreme.

As Van Kuljk puts it: "Aruba is a nice place to be, I think, and if not for the politics I might stay."

HUNTER S. THOMPSON

## Governors Rockefeller and Brown